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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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INDIA: THE ARMY AND COMMUNALISM

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Summary

The one million-man Indian Army, which has a long apolitical tradition and a deserved reputation for competence in battle, is coming under new strains as it simultaneously plays an increasing role in quelling civil disorders and copes with unprecedented conflicts between Sikhs and Hindus in the ranks. Still, we believe Army commanders will do whatever is necessary to maintain order domestically and within the service, and that the overall discipline of the Army will remain basically intact. In our view, Army intervention in politics would occur only in the event of widespread and prolonged domestic anarchy or an external security crisis that the central government was unwilling or unable to manage. To respond to Army concerns, Rajiv probably will seek to withdraw the Army from internal peacekeeping duties as rapidly as possible.

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This memorandum was prepared by [] with a contribution by [] of the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. Information as of 5 November 1984 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, South Asia Division, NESA, []

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Because of weaknesses in India's large police and paramilitary forces the Army over the past few years has played an increasingly important role in quelling civil disorders:

- The local constabulary is unarmed and incapable of halting major domestic unrest.
- The state police are neither adequately trained nor equipped. Morale is low, discipline poor, and the police have a reputation for corruption. Since 1980 the widespread acquisition of illegal arms by Hindus and Muslims has hindered police efforts to restore order in communal riots.
- India's 250,000-man paramilitary forces--primarily the Central Reserve Police Force and the Border Security Forces--are better armed and trained than the state police, but are poorly led. Their performance against Sikh extremists in the Punjab in the summer was inadequate.
- Differences in rank, organization, and training have created problems when both paramilitary forces and state police have been assigned to cope with civil disorders. Tension has been exacerbated by the tendency of state governments to retain paramilitary units under their control as long as possible.

The Sikhs In the Army

Although Sikhs represent only 2-3 percent of the Indian population, they comprised 11 percent of total Army strength in 1979, according to an Indian military manpower study. We believe the latter ratio is still valid.

Sikhs account for 20 to 30 percent of the officer corps and that they occupy command positions at Army and regional headquarters, corps and division levels.

The Army's June assault on the Golden Temple--the holiest of Sikh shrines--and the assassination of Indira Gandhi on 31 October by Sikh bodyguards heightened Hindu-Sikh tension within the Army as well as the nation:

- In the aftermath of the Army assault on the Golden Temple at least 2,000 Sikh soldiers deserted in protest against the actions by the Army and the central government.

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-- [] the mutineers have been imprisoned and at least the ring leaders are to be court martialed. []

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-- After Indira Gandhi's assassination, clashes between Sikh and non-Sikh troops occurred in some units. Senior Sikh officers also joined together for protection following civilian attacks on their homes in New Delhi []

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-- Rumors--strongly denied by Defense Ministry officials--that a retired Sikh Army General helped mastermind the assassination added to mistrust. []

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Sikh officers are uneasy about future opportunities for command responsibilities within the military. []

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[] some officers have already tendered their resignations. Sikh troops also are likely to be concerned over their status. Sikh willingness to serve might further diminish if violence against Sikhs resumes and if Rajiv refuses to negotiate with Sikh leaders on their demands for greater autonomy. []

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We believe the great proportion of Sikh officers currently remain loyal to the Army and the government, and that overall Army discipline remains basically intact. No Sikh commissioned officers are reported to have deserted or failed to carry out orders during the Punjab crisis or the latest round of Hindu-Sikh violence. Some of the commanders who led the assault on the Golden Temple were Sikhs. []

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The Army and Politics

Scholars and other close observers of India have long noted factors that limit the Army's ability and willingness to intervene in politics:

-- The military establishment is large, diverse, and sprawling. It is also recruited from all religious and ethnic groups, and divided into numerous commands. Many senior officers probably do not know one another.

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-- A constant theme in Army training is the need to stay out of politics. In our view, the military believes no less firmly than civilians in the legitimacy of civilian control and in keeping civilian and military spheres of authority separate and distinct. []

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The Army's apolitical tradition was reinforced in 1977 during the period of national emergency declared by Mrs. Gandhi. []

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[] at the same time, they also refused to speak out against it. []

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[redacted]

In our view, however, some changes in the military's basic attitude toward the government slowly have been taking place:

-- Writings of retired senior military officers show resentment over incompetence at high political levels -- especially when that [redacted]

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-- In the view of some officers, the legitimacy, integrity, and capability of the central political system have been badly eroded over the past decade. This erosion, in their view, includes the conversion of the Congress Party into a vehicle for Indira Gandhi's personal rule and the demonstrated failure in the late 1970s of the opposition to govern effectively, fairly, and free of corruption.

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New Delhi's increasing use of troops to suppress internal turmoil has also raised concern among [redacted]

[redacted] Domestic peacekeeping duties, they argue, disrupt regular military activities and lower morale.

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[redacted] Army troops particularly dislike using force against civilians--especially members of their own ethnic group. [redacted]

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Outlook

Faced with the military's objections to domestic peacekeeping duties, Rajiv most likely will order a gradual return of the Army to the barracks. He also probably will move to reorganize and revitalize the state police and paramilitary forces. Because such rebuilding will take time, he will be forced in the interim to continue to rely heavily on the Army if significant domestic unrest reappears. [redacted]

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The character of the Indian Army probably will change somewhat as a result of the assassination and the desertions by Sikhs. [redacted] the government is considering ending its system of ethnic regiments--e.g., disbanding all-Sikh units. Personnel from different ethnic and religious backgrounds reportedly would be integrated into the regiments even at the initial cost of additional tension. New Delhi also has thought about replacing some Sikh officers with non-Sikh officers. [redacted]

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[redacted] into the Army and to make the composition of the Army more closely reflect the makeup of Indian society. [redacted]

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In our view, the Army will not intervene in politics unless there is widespread, prolonged disorder or a central governmental inability or unwillingness to cope with an external security crisis. We do not believe the Army would move against a central government that adopted an authoritarian approach to solving domestic crises. [redacted]

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